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March 1969

MALI: ANOTHER BROKEN SHOWCASE

Since the early 1960's the phrase "West African Radicals" has become the figure of speech used to describe the original leaders of that amalgam known as Guinea, Ghana, and Mali. The African Radicals were those who tried to keep equidistant from Moscow and Peking. Their radicalism was a mixture of Marxist-Maoist slogans and "scientific socialism" heavily trimmed with African culture, nationalism and anti-imperialism.

Now, at the end of the 1960's, only one of these former radical leaders remains in power in West Africa: Sekou Touré in Guinea. Ghana extricated herself in February 1966 and Mali in November 1968 and joined those developing countries which try to stay uncommitted between the Western and Communist alliances. Both former heads of state, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Modibo Keita in Mali, are looked to as symbolizing the "struggle for freedom from colonialism"; both were victimized by a slow and subtle Communist subversion which led their countries to economic chaos and which facilitated their own overthrow by military coup.

Both Ghana and Mali went under in what President Nyerere of Tanzania (himself a potential victim) described in 1963 as "the second scramble for Africa." Dr. Banda, President of Malawi, has dubbed the scramble as being one "not so much for the body of Africa as for its soul." Both Ghana and Mali were losers in a Sino-Soviet poker game in which "foreign aid" was used as chips.

The case of Ghana is public knowledge and Nkrumah's rule is now synonymous with Communist (Soviet) exploitation designed to foster the spread of militant revolution throughout Africa. The story of Keita's eight-year flirtation with socialism is not as well known. It is a story worth telling -- especially in the context of Sino-Soviet designs on West Africa. The story warrants publicizing throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America: the locale could shift, the characters change, but the scenario would remain basically the same.

République du Mali

The Republic of Mali became independent on 22 September 1960. In December 1958, leaders of the French West African territories met to decide various aspects of their future. Some leaders favored forming a federation to recreate the old Mali empire which had played an important part in northwest Africa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Disagreements arose over attitudes to be adopted towards Pan-Africanism, positive neutrality, relations with the Soviet Union, and a number of other matters. The outcome was that the "grand" federation was not created, but, instead, Senegal and the (French) Sudan formed the smaller, but still territorially large, "Federation of Mali."

Modibo Keita, a Moslem and a descendant of the emperors of ancient Mali, was already the undisputed leader of the (French) Sudan. Keita became Prime Minister of the Mali Federation and Mamadou Dia, of Senegal, Deputy Prime Minister. The two had little in common: Keita pushed for neutrality and Dia for closer ties with France. Within months, the Federation was dissolved and the independent state of Senegal and the Republic of Mali went their separate ways.

Within twelve months, the USSR, Communist China, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, North Vietnam, North Korea, and Mongolia had established diplomatic missions in Bamako and Modibo Keita had begun accepting blandishments and advice from the Communist world. In addition, Mali's ruling party, the Union Soudanaise, was represented at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), held in 1961. It was at this Congress that the ruling parties of Ghana, Guinea, and Mali were introduced as "national democratic parties" which had identified themselves with the Communist cause.

The Phenomenon of Competitive Subversion

As early as the 1960 Moscow World Congress of Communist and Workers Parties, a new type of state concept emerged which was acceptable to Communist doctrine and applicable to the developing countries. They were to be known as "autonomous states of national democracy" and were defined as those states which: fought imperialism (that is, the West), opposed (Western) military bases on their soil, gave full democratic rights to the people (that is local Communist Parties, fronts and labor groups), and showed their readiness to introduce democratic (that is, socialist) reforms that would pave the way for Communism. However, even though the Congress delegates were all good Communists, it proved impossible to keep quiet all members of all delegations and it soon became known that it was the Soviets who sponsored the concept of "national democracy" and the Chinese who opposed it.

The divergence between Moscow and Peking, however, was only tactical. Soviet theorists hoped that once a State embarked on a "non-capitalist" path of development, it would eventually turn Marxist. Mao Tse-tung, from his own experience, could not believe in the two-stage revolutionary process and supported (and supports) firm Communist control over revolutionary development and its expansion into non-Communist countries by a militant-revolutionary vanguard. However, there was (and is) no conflict between Chinese and Soviet views when it came to the goal of cultivating and manipulating the emerging revolutionary leaders to foster socialism and to facilitate the spread of Communism.

As a further refinement of the Soviet approach, the Moscow Institute for World Economy and International Relations in 1961 split the developing countries into six groupings. The division was to serve as a guideline for the Soviet Union's differentiated political approach to each delineated group. The nations evaluated as "the most promising" from the standpoint of Soviet policy were those in "Group Four" which included Ghana, Guinea, and Mali.* They were the countries where the leaders already were constructing a national democratic nation and where there existed a "proletariat that is becoming class conscious." As the case of Mali shows, the Chinese did less theorizing than the Soviets, but sometimes proved themselves more opportunistic in exploiting situations unforeseen in textbooks.

The "Aid" Agreements

The initial Mali-Soviet aid agreement for a loan of \$44 million, at a 2.5 per cent interest rate, was signed 18 March 1961; it was later increased to \$61 million. To implement the agreement, somewhere between 300 and 400 Soviet (and other Bloc) technicians came to Mali. They surveyed for many projects: a roadbed for a rail line to give Mali an independent (of Senegal) link to the sea; for oil, gold, diamonds, and cement; and for development of the Niger River along 125 miles, including technical surveys for hydroelectric projects. The railroad project was dropped and no oil, diamonds, or gold were reported found.

Also during 1961 Mali contracted for a small number of Soviet military trucks, jeeps, and small arms. Capital goods outlay from the economic aid agreement went into the building and equipping of a technical high school for 300 students and the allocation of \$10 million for agricultural development, including equipment and a Polytechnical and Agricultural Institute.

In Bamako, the Soviets built a small-scale impact project: a 25,000-seat stadium. Completed in 1967, the stadium was to be the home of the 1969 Pan-African Games. For Mali, with her minuscule reserve of technically qualified indigenous personnel, the "technical services" debt to the USSR for all the surveys described above was inordinately high and consumed a large share of the original outlay of Soviet credits. Therefore, while the stadium is for Malians a symbol of pride, its presence and construction under Soviet auspices (and with the use of Soviet credits) is illustrative of an "aid project" hardly guaranteed to ease Mali's indebtedness to the USSR.

*Indonesia, the UAR, Algeria, Burma, and Congo (Brazzaville) also have at various times been placed in the Group Four, most "promising" category.

Mali's airline also received Soviet assistance and promptly went into competition with the Soviet-aided Air Guinea. From the USSR, Mali bought Soviet-built transports, including some IL-18 transports that were so costly to run that the Soviet's initial subsidy of \$6.4 had to be increased the following year to \$11 million. Granted that some of Air Mali losses resulted from inept management and Mali's insistence on a Bamako-Paris air link, but it was primarily Soviet bungling of aircraft maintenance problems that caused Mali, by 1965, to try and get the USSR to take back these same transports.

By an agreement concluded February 1961, Communist China had been the first to promise substantial financial aid to Mali. However, handicapped by a lack of available funds, as compared to the USSR, the Chinese aid agreement was limited to \$20 million -- but it was interest-free. Of an additional \$20 million extended by Communist China in 1964, only about one-fifth of the amount had been seen in Mali by mid-1967.

Early Chinese aid focused on the "agrarian class" (viewed as part of the militant revolutionary vanguard) and Chinese technicians devoted their efforts to building up sugar, cotton, tea, and rice production. There has been no official nose count of the Chinese in Mali under this early agreement, but it was undeniably the largest Chinese mission in Africa -- at one early point numbering over 1,200. It was once reported that the Chinese had proposed establishing agricultural communes in Mali in which Chinese peasants would live and work together with an equal number of Malian peasants.

In 1962, in a burst of nationalist enthusiasm President Keita removed Mali from the West African Monetary Union, whose currency was guaranteed by France, and established his own currency. In foreign trade, the emphasis shifted to barter arrangements made with Keita's new Communist trade partners. At the same time, 23 State enterprises were set up to run Mali's economy and industry. But without experienced management or reserves of convertible currency to back it up, the Mali franc could not cope with Mali's growing adverse trade balance and the need to service loans. The barter deals prevented Mali, for example, from taking advantage of preferential prices offered by France for ground-nuts since so much of the Mali crop had been mortgaged against machinery and services.

More Improverished Than Independent

The pinnacle of Modibo Keita's socialist venture probably was reached in 1965. That year he went to Moscow and signed up for a 50,000-ton capacity cement plant and a full-blown Soviet military aid program to equip his 3,500-man army with Soviet T-34 tanks, armored cars, grenade launchers, and other prestige-value materiel.

For his six-man air force, pilots to be trained in the USSR, he purchased four fighter aircraft: one MIG-15 and three MIG-17's. The glamor was slightly tarnished, however, as Keita's delegation tried unsuccessfully to get the Soviet Union to take back the costly, inefficient IL-14 and IL-18 transports they had previously bought for Air Mali.

Keita's 1965 Moscow visit was also a political victory; his Union Soudanaise was one of the first accepted by the CPSU as a "fraternal unity party." The two parties issued a joint statement declaring that: "The CPSU and the Union Soudanaise Party are of the opinion that the expansion of interparty relations, the reciprocal acquaintance with each other's experiences in the building of the state, the reciprocal study of methods of party work and reciprocal exchange of information will serve to fortify cooperation between the two parties." (Pravda, 12 October 1965)

To mold the development of Mali's unity party along proper lines, the Soviets also agreed to build in Bamako, and give the equipment for, a school to train administrators for the Union Soudanaise Party. It was further agreed that when the Soviets began construction of the school, fourteen leading functionaries of the Union Soudanaise should go to Moscow for training at the CPSU party school.

Hard currency credits were extended to Mali in mid-1965 by Communist China. The amount was unspecified, but described as "substantial." The grant did not halt Mali's economic deterioration and as is usually the case with unsuccessful aid projects, the blame fell to the creditor -- in this case, the Soviet Union. Soviet aid was not as helpful as had been originally anticipated. Air Mali was nearly bankrupt and much Soviet agricultural equipment was unsuited to the rigors of the tropical climate. Many of the Soviet projects did nothing to help increase productive capacity and others were abandoned because of faulty preliminary planning.

In June 1966 arrived the first consignments of military equipment that the Soviets had promised in October 1965. Transport of the shipment from the West African Coast into landlocked Mali was only feasible by using the Senegal-Mali rail link. Since this arrangement would have been politically impossible, Keita arranged for shipment through Algeria. The equipment arrived, following a 1,400 mile trek across the Sahara desert, in somewhat less than optimum condition.

By mid-1966, the Soviet aid program was being viewed more realistically in Moscow and Soviet planners were increasingly reluctant to undertake projects that had little long-term economic justification. Mali was one country that felt the pinch. A Malian

delegation that went to Moscow in May 1966 to procure additional Soviet aid was unsuccessful and returned with only the promise that a small hard-currency loan would be extended. In June 1966 Communist China and Mali signed a new agreement providing for an additional, but less substantial, hard currency loan.

Since the overthrow of Keita it has become known that Communist China offered to guarantee Mali's financial independence if Mali would accept China's advice regarding "the proper road to socialism" in Africa. It is to President Keita's credit that he turned to Paris rather than Peking to seek a way out of his financial disaster.

On 16 February 1967, the Malian government signed economic and financial accords in Paris providing for Mali's eventual return to the franc zone, but calling for strict economic and fiscal reforms, while the French Treasury guaranteed the convertibility of the Malian franc. In May, the value of the Mali franc was halved and the country adopted an austerity budget.

But the financial agreements with France cooled neither the fervor of "revolutionary consciousness" nor Keita's socialist orientation. Youth demonstrations which started in July, perhaps partly brought on by the national austerity program, served as the impetus to purge the Union Soudanaise of "corrupt elements." On 22 August, President Keita announced that Mali had reached a "dangerous turning point," dissolved the Politburo of his Union Soudanaise, and replaced it by a Comité National de Défense de la Révolution (CNRD).

Keita organized the new CNRD along more orthodox Communist lines than he had its predecessor party. Keita took even more power into his own hands by assuming the posts of President, Party General, and Minister of Economy as well as of Defense. The same period saw the beginning of the "People's Militia" and Keita took a page from Mao's book of cultural revolution to instigate "Operation Taxi." The revolution purged the old party of some 177 "corrupt" officials who supposedly supplemented their incomes by owning taxis. The aim was to replace ideological moderates with revolutionary purists.

Meanwhile, by mid-1967 only about one-fifth of the aid promised by China in 1964 had been seen in Mali. During 1967 the Chinese did complete several projects: a cinema, a motel, a sugar refinery, a match factory, and a textile plant and had started building a rice mill. As had been the case with Soviet undertakings, none provided for repayment of loans much less guaranteeing any foreign exchange income. For the match factory, Mali was dependent on China for sulphur supplies -- and both the match factory and textile plant could be competitive with similar plants built in Guinea by Communist China.

The Coup

1968 found Keita economically hamstrung by his "Communist partners" and revealed him as a frightened victim of his political commitments. Mali was the only African Government to publicly support the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia on 20-21 August 1968. The fact that Mali's public endorsement was not announced until 3 September is clear evidence that it was elicited under political pressure from the Soviet Union. (In June 1967 Mali had been one of the few countries in the world to publicly applaud Communist China's announcement of her first successful hydrogen bomb test.)

Early in 1968 China picked up the option for the Mali-Guinea railroad and committed herself to do what everyone else, including the Soviets, had decided was economically unsound. Moscow Radio called the Chinese offer an "extravagant propaganda gesture." China's ability to deliver the needed technical skill and raw materials (including steel) remains in doubt. Meanwhile, the "agreement" opened the way for additional Chinese "technicians" to enter West Africa by the hundreds.

Despite Keita's public statements that he was "determined to implement the monetary agreements signed with France," he did not implement that part of the accords calling for elimination of the inefficiencies of state enterprises. Mali's austerity program was in force -- but there were no tangible results. Even a \$30 million infusion of French funds and the presence of a French expert in the Finance Ministry could not halt the deterioration of the economy. By mid-November only \$4 million of the French fund remained.

Immediately after the student demonstrations of July 1967, President Keita had declared that "militants should always be allowed to express their opinions even if they are contrary to those of the party leaders." Nevertheless, his next step was to establish the People's Militia and to accept the proffered aid of Communist China to equip and train his youthful militia. By November 1968, the army, increasingly alarmed at the growing strength and unwieldiness of the President's militia, saw that militia as a threat to their own security. A spate of rumors concerning the imminence of a new, widespread purge of government and military figures very possibly led the army to fear the militia might move first -- and so, the army acted on 19 November.

Suggested Reading, in addition to the attached press articles:

Kurt Muller, Foreign Aid Programs of the Soviet Bloc and Communist China: An Analysis, Walker & Co, New York, 1967

Marshall I. Goldman, Soviet Foreign Aid, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1967

Brian Crozier, The Struggle for the Third World, The Bodley Head, London, 1966